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Moral Panics, Claims-Making and Child Protection in the UK

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Abstract

This paper brings sociological theory on moral panics to a discussion of child protection social work in the UK. We begin by considering the extent to which policy and practice may be susceptible to distortion by 'claims-making', the influence of which, we will argue, casts a rarely explored and less understood influence on the service's practice and direction. We conclude that claims-making has had a detrimental effect on child protection, contributing to a coarsening of attitudes towards families in child protection work, a retreat from preventative practice and a deterioration in relationships between social workers, service users and members of the public more generally.

Keywords: Child protection, claims-making, moral panics

Accepted:



Introduction

Stanley Cohen's (1972) analysis of moral panics has been highly influential in the development of critical ideas about contemporary social concerns and anxieties over the last forty years. In *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen examined incidents of social alarm that had gripped the public imagination in the 1950s and 1960s. Looking particularly at the confrontations between 'Mods' and 'Rockers' that had taken place on a number of beaches in England in 1964, he identified that the reaction to these events had been disproportionate—far greater than these minor skirmishes between young people had warranted. Cohen drew attention to the role of the media in amplifying the events. He also, however, highlighted that incidents like these were

stoked by ‘moral guardians of society’, that is, the local councillors, magistrates, politicians, religious leaders and others whom Cohen described as ‘moral entrepreneurs’ (Cohen, 1972, p. 66). Not only did moral entrepreneurs channel public concern, but they contributed to a process of ‘net-widening’ (Cohen, 1972, p. 83), which, he argued, transformed an incident or concern into a ‘moral panic’.

Twenty years later, Jenkins picked up the idea of moral entrepreneurs in his investigation into allegations of ‘satanic’ child sexual abuse in the UK in the 1980s and early 1990s. A number of separate incidents had led to the removal of children from families in different parts of the UK at this time. These incidents were identified as ‘satanic abuse’; sections of the media (including the social work press) carried stories that fore-grounded the satanic dimension in these cases, illustrating their coverage with allusions to devils and covens (Clapton, 1993). Later analysis found that, although children had been abused, there was no evidence to support allegations of satanic abuse (La Fontaine, 1998). Reviewing this period as a whole, Jenkins argued that social work had acted precipitately under the influence of exaggerated anxieties; the controversy around satanic ritual abuse could, he suggested, be regarded as a classic moral panic. He employed the phrase ‘claims-makers’ to refer to those who, like Cohen’s moral entrepreneurs, involved themselves in the kind of moralising projects, campaigns and crusades that contribute to the genesis of a moral panic.

In 2012, a group of social work academics in Scotland revisited the idea of moral panics again, seeking to examine the usefulness of this concept as a way of understanding some twenty-first-century child-care concerns. Three academic articles have already been published in relation to this, and a blog created (<http://moralpanicseminarsseries.wordpress.com>). In the journal papers, Clapton *et al.* (2012) discuss current child protection anxieties (obesity, use of the internet, ‘grooming’ of children) and argue that such concerns may be misdirected as a result of a pervasive climate of panic relating to child and young person endangerment. Cree *et al.* (2012) apply a historical lens to their examination of past and present alarms about child trafficking, while Smith *et al.* (2012) critically examine the question of historical abuse in residential childcare.

In this Critical Commentary, we pick out one key aspect of moral panic theory (claims-making), and consider the ways in which current UK child protection policy and practice may be influenced by claims-making, that is, by the activities of high-profile individuals, pressure groups and campaigns that impact on academics, policy makers, trainers and practitioners to take the service in a particular direction. Specifically, we ask how far claims-making has contributed to a retreat from preventative practice and a deterioration in social work’s relationships with the public, especially in relation to its work with children and families.

The state of UK child protection

Child protection social work in the UK has been in the spotlight for twenty years or more. Eighteen years ago, Cooper *et al.* drew attention to what they saw as a 'siege mentality' in local authority social work departments: 'When French social workers participating in our study first walked through the doors of a London area office, they were astounded by the fortress atmosphere of the reception area' (Cooper *et al.*, 1995, p. 111).

Three years later, Croghan and Miell's study found that service users' experience of social work was negative and distressing. As one 'bad mother' said: 'My warning to people now is that if you need help the last people you should go to is to social services. We warn anybody we can. They are not there to help' (Croghan and Miell, 1998, p. 454). In a similarly depressing observation, Jones noted in his study of perceptions of statutory social work that 'In many disadvantaged and marginalised working-class places, social workers are seen as part of the problem and not as part of the solution' (Jones, 2001, p. 558).

The situation has not improved in recent years, and arguably has worsened. Writing in the British Association of Social Workers' (BASW's) *Professional Social Work* magazine, Maggie Mellon, social work consultant and former director of services at Children 1st, remarks: 'We have built a child protection system which is experienced by families as a modern version of the Spanish Inquisition' (Mellon, 2009, p. 22). Instead of giving support to vulnerable families, social work was only able to offer monitoring and surveillance of their lives (see also Lonne *et al.*, 2009).

If anything, 'fortress social work' has intensified. Alongside this, 'compassion fatigue' (Richardson, 2011), hopelessness (van Heugten, 2011) and extremely low practitioner morale (Martin *et al.*, 2010) have all been noted among child protection workers. *The Munro Review of Child Protection* (2011) acknowledges much of this and calls for a return to more relationship-based social work and an end to the worst aspects of managerialism, with its emphasis on 'tick-boxes' and outcomes rather than process and quality of service. We support this new direction in children and families' social work, and see it as a positive way forward for practitioners and for those with whom we are working. However, we believe that there are some key pressures on practice that merit examination at this time, which, unless brought into the debate, are likely to subvert Munro's best intentions. One of these is the 'net-widening' that Cohen (1972) referred to as claims-makers extend the reach of children and families' social work into ever-increasing new areas, so that the traditional social work territory of child and family support services becomes overshadowed by a blaming and inquisitorial focus form of child protection practice.

Claims-making

Child protection is, of course, always at the centre of anxieties about children's welfare. This can be demonstrated in a number of 'flare-ups' of concern over the last 150 years or so: moral crusades targeting poor parenting in the nineteenth century; the 'satanic' abuse panics of the 1980s and early 1990s; today's burgeoning concerns, for instance, over children's use of the internet and childhood obesity, all emerge out of a wish to protect children. Child protection concerns then have a tendency to develop into more widespread alarm, focused on either acts of commission (e.g. in the case of 'satanic' abuse, where it was alleged that children were being abused by adults who were 'satanists') or omission (e.g. when parents fail to supervise internet use). One of the key elements in a moral panic is claims-making, that is, the amplification of an initial problem and a demand for action to address this. In some cases, individuals (such as a parent, a politician, an academic, a media personality) act as claims-makers; in others, large children's charities assume a prominent role, often linked to a call for funding to unearth the full scale of a problem and support those affected.

A common feature of claims-making is the warning that an event or events are 'the tip of the iceberg'. For instance, during the investigation into Jimmy Savile and child abuse in late 2012, under the headline 'Jimmy Savile and the IRA', *The Mirror* declared that 'Sources close to the investigation believe the complaints that have emerged so far are the tip of the iceberg' (20 October 2012). Such claims are, of course, impossible to prove or disprove. 'Tip of the iceberg' or not, claims-making has real consequences on policy and practice. As noted by Jenkins, writing of the UK events of Cleveland in 1987 when over 100 children were removed from their families after misconceived suspicions of sexual abuse, it can lead to 'perceptions of a major problem requiring the urgent allocation of new resources: a larger and more specialised child protection establishment would mean more investigation and detection and thus more concern' (Jenkins, 1992, p. 140).

In this way, claims-making can be said to expand the territory by extending the parameters of what is considered to be the subject of child protection attention. Childhood obesity is a good example of this phenomenon. Until recently, children's weight was regarded as a matter for public health and education, not child protection. But, in a recent interview, a spokesperson for the BASW was quoted as saying that childhood obesity 'is relatively new on the child protection radar' (see Griffiths, 2010, p. 17). More recently, 'emotional neglect' has come into the spotlight with a leading children's charity calling for the criminal law on neglect to be updated to include an expanded definition that would allow the prosecution of parents for failure to emotionally nurture their children (see Action for Children, April 2012). Another example of this is a conference held in 2012 that sought to highlight 'the corporate and commercial exploitation of children' as 'A New Category

of Child Abuse', arguing that a new and widened definition of 'significant harm' was needed.

When such claims are picked up by the media and politicians (calls to do something to protect children are always popular and rarely questioned), the ripples spread outwards and public opinion may become consolidated in a particular direction. For example, who now questions that Jimmy Savile 'groomed a nation' or that child sexual exploitation is on the increase? Media and politicians are not the only claims-makers. A mesh of grant-making bodies and funders may pick up a concern, and likewise popular soaps, plays and fiction seeking a powerful storyline may contribute to the 'weight' of a claim. Policy makers may then take heed. Claims-making can thus set agendas and contribute to a process of net-widening which is a regular feature of the contemporary child protection discourse, policy and practice. A consequence of this is pressure on social workers to keep up with and concentrate on whatever is the latest assumed threat to children's safety, whether this is child trafficking, sibling sexual abuse or internet 'trolling', to name just three current concerns. This is not to suggest that these issues are not worrying and should not receive our attention. Rather, it is to point out that, by following the latest threat, regular, day-to-day, supportive services may suffer as a result, just as the Munro report has identified in terms of the loss of relationship-building in child protection.

What is happening to family social work in local authorities?

In 1991, Mellon and Clapton observed that social work with families had been reduced to little more than child protection work. This trend has continued apace to the point at which children and families social work is characterised by regulation-driven assessments and support-free surveillance (Lonne *et al.*, 2009; Scourfield and Welsh, 2003). Furthermore, the focus in child protection work may not be families any more. For instance, the Scottish Government initiative, *Getting It Right For Every Child* (Scottish Government, 2008), has been described as 'laudable in intent' (Mellon, 2012) and advances some undisputable priorities for children; however, it 'often portrays children as separate from families, and professionals as having equal importance with families'. The writer goes on to point out that 'A key visual used is the "My World" Triangle with the child in the centre of circles of professionals' with the 'My friends and family' dimension characterised as a "service" they might or might not need'. Research conducted for the UK government confirms this tendency to individualise social work in the statutory sector, the Social Exclusion Task Force recently noted:

... repeated evidence of family-based services or models in reality being adult or child-based provision, with little acknowledgement of the important

differences between working with families as opposed to working with members of families (the evidence is of the latter rather than the former being the dominant approach) ([Social Exclusion Task Force, 2008](#), p. 6).

Starting with assessing children's safety and working outwards, social work activity focuses upon monitoring the behaviour of parents (usually mothers). Beyond this, there is little opportunity for supportive intervention; social work with families, as in group work with family dynamics, seems to feature rarely in practice, in spite of a continuing interest in this area in some of the social work literature (see, e.g. the *Groupwork* journal).

But does all this child-focused attention provide actual assistance to the families in which children live? A service user interviewed by Jones in his study said:

Nobody is offering them jobs, any type of support or access into social networks that might get them out of the place. All they might get is a social worker who will go round to their house and ask a lot of questions—a bloody cheek many of them think—and because there are no immediate child protection needs they will get nothing (quoted in [Jones, 2001](#), p. 557).

Another critique of contemporary children and family social work is contained in an England Children's Commissioner report:

I remember when she came and she looked in my fridge, in the cupboard. This was recent. She said, 'I can see the kids are well fed.' I said yes, but there's mould all over the wall, and damp in the bedrooms. What are you going to do about that? She said she couldn't do anything, that was housing; she was here to talk about my neglect. So it's OK for us to be neglected? ([Office of the Children's Commissioner for England, 2010](#), p. 26).

The report continues:

There was a strong sense that (families) were left to struggle and cope with what they saw as the unmanageable. When it all fell apart, they had child protection services imposed upon them, and they were represented as failures. This made people angry, and they felt their previous requests for services were never mentioned or acknowledged. This left them, as they saw it, labelled as uncaring, neglectful or abusive ([Office of the Children's Commissioner for England, 2010](#), p. 29).

The focus on children, rather than families, is of course not in itself new. The Jasmine Beckford Inquiry ([London Borough of Brent, 1985](#)) was unequivocal in its view that social workers' primary responsibility was the protection of children; parents' needs were secondary to this. The direction of child-care practice was therefore set from then on as being away from preventative work with families towards securing 'better' (substitute) parenting elsewhere. Today, this trend in child protection has rarely been more explicit:

Social workers seemed reluctant to offer help to people with poor mental health those using alcohol and drugs, and those experiencing domestic abuse. The family members said that they had heard time and again:

‘We are here for your children, not for you’ (Office of the Children’s Commissioner for England, 2010, p. 21, emphasis added).

Whether this approach proves to be beneficial to children remains to be seen. One of the consequences for social workers, however, has been the decline of optimism, often expressed in terms of low morale in the profession (Local Government Association, 2009).

Coarsening social work attitudes?

The end of a more optimistic and less deficit-driven form of social work that does not counter-pose children and their families may be traced to Blom-Cooper’s criticism of the ‘rule of optimism’ in his Jasmine Beckford Inquiry Report. Here, he suggested that social workers had been so determined to return children to their parents that they had refused to see the signs of trouble after that, and this was symptomatic of a more general social work malaise with its roots in the notion of ‘some impermeable bond between natural parents and child’ (London Borough of Brent, 1985, p. 9). This has led, we believe, not so much to a ‘healthy scepticism’ as Laming (2003) called for, but to the emergence of a ‘rule of pessimism’ in childcare and protection.

Recent discussions on child protection practice witnessed in the social work press and demonstrated in training events show not only that social workers may not be ‘on the side’ of the families with whom they are involved, but, worse, we may be seeing a sharp increase in an ‘us and them’ attitude between social workers and service users. In 2010, *Community Care* ran an article entitled ‘Facing up to obstructive parents’ in which one ‘expert’ interviewee was quoted as wishing social workers could have the same ways as the police of handling difficult service users, adding that ‘The one thing that would possibly decrease service users’ ability to interfere with cases would be having police officers attached to frontline teams. That would change the dynamic and service users would consider the visits differently’ (quoted in Garboden, 2010, p. 18).

This picks up an interesting theme in Garrett’s (2004) study of joint working in police and social services. He notes that, whilst the police perceived themselves to be the ‘lead agency’ in child protection, social workers seemed willing to go along with this, to the extent of adopting police language and attitudes. Garboden’s article also refers to ‘interfering’ and ‘obstructive parents’ whose emotions are to be disregarded as ‘manipulative’. The publicity for a *Community Care* Conference in 2010 takes this antipathy to a new level. Entitled ‘Working with “highly resistant” parents’, it has sessions on ‘Hostile and obstructive clients’, one entitled ‘Disguised compliance’, which talks about the psychology of parents who use ‘passive covert manipulation’, deceptive and ‘grooming’ behaviour (towards social workers)

and how to tell when you are being duped. Another training course entitled 'Working with difficult, dangerous and evasive families' being delivered in May 2013 by the training organisation Reconstruct similarly constructs families as negative and thus to be feared and mistrusted.

Clearly, there are other pressures on child protection work. Part of the problematic state of child protection social work today must be a reaction to decades of increased impoverishment of the client grouping with which child protection has traditionally been engaged; trying and failing to practise social work with diminishing resources is a dispiriting undertaking. The full impact of welfare reform in the UK is yet to be experienced, and this will inevitably make things worse, for practitioners and for families. Increasing performance management demands and the proliferation of administrative recording and reporting alongside ineffective IT systems has also taken its toll on social workers' spirits and confidence (Wastell *et al.*, 2010; Wastell and White, 2010). It is, of course, not all bad for child protection. There are examples of local authorities which are engaged in initiatives to change the culture in children and families' social work, as demonstrated, for example, in the 2013 City of Edinburgh and East Lothian Councils' ESRC-sponsored Knowledge Exchange project with the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. There are also daily acts of resistance by social workers who are still prepared to 'go the extra mile', sometimes bending and even breaking rules in order to give children and families the support they need (see Cree and Davis, 2007). However, it is our belief that policy and practice are increasingly influenced by the domination of an expanding child protection 'industry' (Furedi, 2006) that has risen to prominence on a succession of claims involving the endangerment of children. The degree to which these claims serve the best interests of children and their families is, in our view, contestable.

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Conclusion

In local authorities throughout the UK, preventative and supportive social work with families has been diminished by an ever-increasing and ever-widening number of child protection concerns which originate with individual tragedies, but are then fuelled by the claims-making process we have sketched out. It appears that a child protection industry has developed, ever sensitive to new alarms and threats regarding children and at the ready to issue statements, mount conferences, put on specialised training and, of course, appeal for more resources, often on the basis of evidence that is, at the very least, flimsy. A number of these alarms are self-generated in what we have described as a claims-making process that seems to uncover new and more concerning ways that children may be abused, neglected or otherwise endangered. Until the profession in general, and child protection in particular, develops a critical ability to question and, if necessary, resist fresh claims that result in net-widening of responsibility, demand and

pressure, then social work, but especially child protection in the statutory sector, will remain the blotting paper for every fresh anxiety about children and unable to discern the difference between genuine and disproportionate concerns. Cohen suggests that one of the consequences of moral panics is 'taking some things too seriously and other things not seriously enough' (Cohen, 2002, p. xxxv). It is our final conclusion that an ever-expanding list of items on the child protection radar has occluded the growing impoverishment and immiseration of many individuals, families and communities with which a more emancipatory form of social work might constructively engage.

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